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A Quango for Democracy?

The British have minted a word — quango — which America could now put to good use. Quango stands for quasi-autonomous nongovernmental organ, an example being the British Council. Funded by the Government but directed by private citizens, the Council does what bureaucrats are poorly situated to do: decide how much money to give to which groups for overseas cultural tours and talks. It has literally given Shakespeare the great Globe as a stage.

The idea now percolating in Washington is to create a quango to promote democratic values in developing countries and, where possible, in Communist countries. President Reagan is expected to give the idea his formal blessing in a speech this week in London. It is an appealing idea, but before leaping forward, there needs to be some careful looking.

In normal circumstances, it is neither right nor wise to get openly involved in another country's domestic politics. How would Americans feel if Saudi Arabia — or Israel — tried to advance their policies in this country by making campaign contributions to American politicians? But such aid might be right and wise where other outsiders are assisting extremists of the left or right. In those circumstances, strict nonintervention would amount to abandoning our ideological allies.

For precisely that reason, the United States has

given surreptitious aid to a variety of democratic parties and publications. But because the aid was covert, its amount has been grossly exaggerated by those determined, for example, to blame American subversion in Chile for the fall of an elected left-wing regime. If exposed, covert aid can leave a legacy of ill will and paranoia far outweighing any imaginable benefits.

Would not overt assistance also be politically fatal? Often, yes, but in the right circumstances, a quango could make open funding acceptable. If aid came from a foundation with genuine autonomy, supervised by a board of respected American and foreign figures, it could be as uncontroversial as that already provided by private foundations. European Socialists and Christian Democrats have, without scandal, given generous help to political allies in the third world.

There's a valuable principle here that needs clear definition. The United States ought to have better methods, say, for countering Cuban and Soviet intervention in Nicaragua. The danger is that some of Mr. Reagan's ideological troops may try to turn the principle into self-defeating chauvinism.

The promise of a well-designed quango is that it would advertise the very values of openness and pluralism that Americans want to promote. The prior task, however, is a careful and public study to insure that it is well designed.